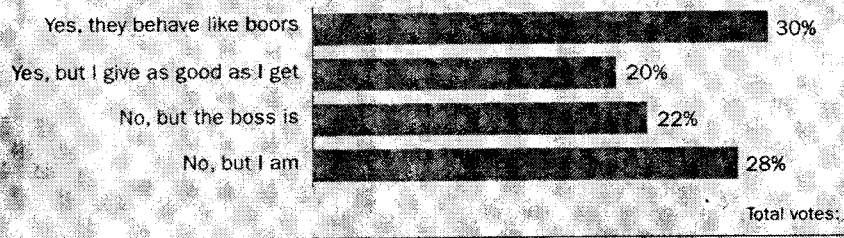
Globe Careers

THE WEEKLY WEB POLL

LAST WEEK'S QUESTION:

Are your co-workers rude and ill-mannered?



THIS WEEK'S QUESTION:

Is abuse of rank common at your workplace?

Vote at globeandmail.com/business

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Nov 2
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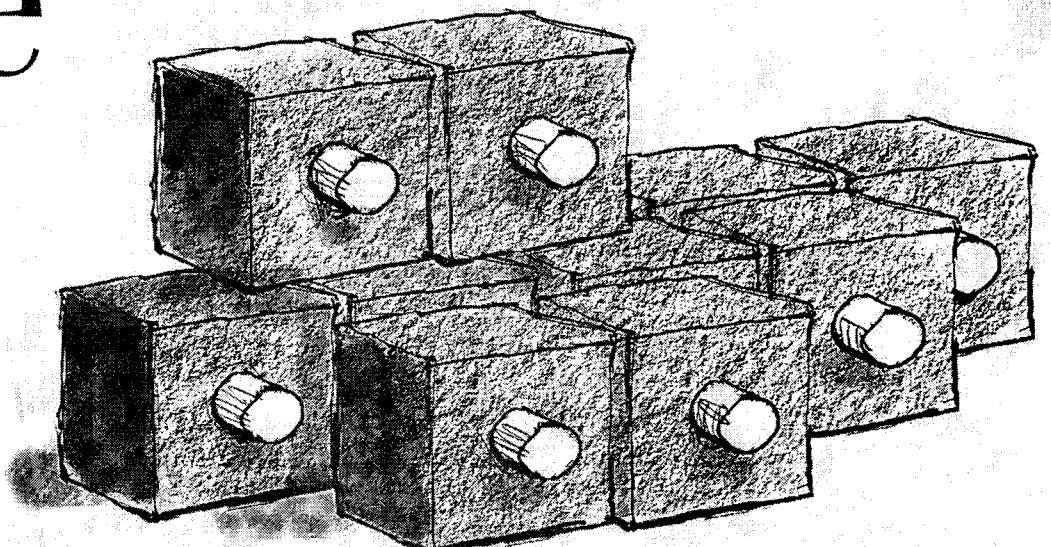
Smooth the wheels of innovation



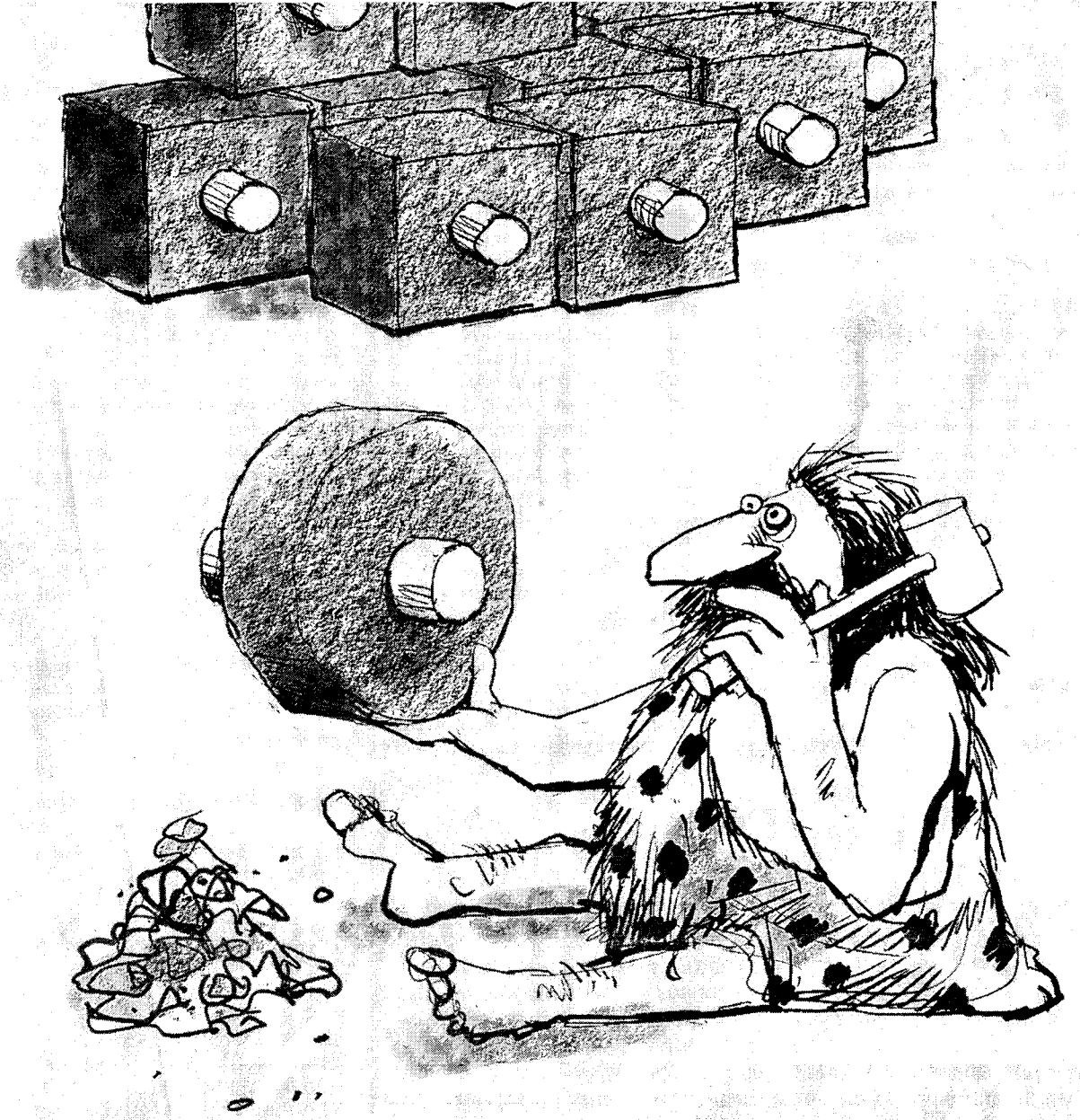


ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN GABLE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

JIM CARROLL
PERSONAL OPINION

Despite years of cost-cutting, many organizations continue to operate with an alarmingly high cost base, with scads of inefficient business processes built into the bureaucracy.

We reinvent the wheel over and over, unable to share ideas and information throughout the organization. We see valuable information walk out the door every time an employee leaves. We infuriate our customers through our inability to provide rapid, effective, intelligent customer support.

Why? Because we refuse to be innovative. We've got to get away from the past, and continue to reinvent ourselves for the future, through the application of all kinds of wildly innovative ideas as to how we work on a day-to-day basis.

Innovation implies courage, among other things. So how do you and your organization get into an innovative frame of mind?

- Recognize that you've got to instill a sense of courage, a willingness to explore new things. The fact is, the current business climate certainly doesn't encourage the emergence of any corporate innovation heroes. Indeed, it would seem that few of us have any gumption to try to do anything different, particularly given the carnage that emerged after the gung-ho nineties. Lots of new ideas there — and look what happened to all the folks who were on the leading edge! Who would dare try anything new?
- Recognize that opportunity abounds for innovative approaches to our day-to-day routine. For example, given the vast range of sophisticated new technologies, there is no shortage of opportunity to continue to be innovative in the way that we utilize and share information within our organization. Have you taken a look at the hot new Internet technology known as Weblogs? They're causing a lot of rethinking within the Internet community as to how to share information and there are plenty of opportunities there for sharing internal corporate knowledge.
- Revisit opportunities to streamline business processes. What about that paper form that gets sent around the company, to be initialled and signed in duplicate and triplicate? There are plenty of inefficient business processes that surround us that could use a tune-up, with resulting efficiencies and cost savings. There are lots of innovative HR professionals who are busy putting in place sophisticated HR self-service employee portals which significantly streamline processes involving benefits management and other functions. Why aren't you?
- Constantly take a look at how you might provide more effective customer support. Innovative organizations continue to explore and implement sophisticated self-service solutions that help a call centre rejig its approach to providing support during peak periods. Customers keep changing and are increasing their expectations as to the type of support you provide, so you'd better make sure that you are innovative in your response.
- Take a look at your partners — suppliers and business associates. Are there unique ways that you might be able to partner with them to reduce costs, or simply make these interorganization relationships work better?

All of these issues, and more, have little to do with the development of new products, yet are equally important in becoming an innovative organization.

See CHANGE on page C2

Put an innovation loop in place

CHANGE *from page C1*

Of course, you won't succeed at all if you have a corporate culture that stops innovation dead in its tracks. If your executives are fond of statements such as "that's the dumbest thing I ever heard," "that's not my problem," "you can't fix that" and "it won't work," then you've got a lot of work to do to develop a culture that supports innovative processes.

How can you change from being such an organization to one that weaves innovation into everything it does? Work to put in place an "innovation loop." This is a structured system that can help to address the process of innovation within the organization. There are several elements that you establish:

- Personal and corporate innovation radar

Everyone throughout your organization should be prepared to keep a constant eye out for new developments and opportunities that might impact your business or market. This might involve competitors who are launching new customer support initiatives, or who are rolling out new supply chain business transaction systems. It could involve sudden, rapid shifts in customer expectations, or changes in the geographical reach of your sales force. Learn to constantly watch and assess the innovation that surrounds you.

- An innovation receiver

You've got to have a culture that lets you digest and translate the many new initiatives that you discover through your radar. You must learn to turn them into concrete, actionable ideas that might make sense for your organization. Your receiver is a cultural willingness to digest the vast number of observations of the outside world, and the skill to examine and analyze these on the part of everyone to determine which ones might be important.

- An innovation transmitter

As everyone becomes involved in watching and analyzing new developments in the world around them, they must have the ability to share this information with key players throughout the organization. You've got sophisticated knowledge exchange systems, such as e-mail, so learn to use them to support your innovation culture. Of course, establishing new areas of opportunity, whether with business processes or with customer support efforts, won't succeed unless you can ensure that everyone is aware of what could be done. You've got to get the participation of everyone affected. This is where the transmitter comes in — it involves establishing a culture that supports the continuing and regular exchange of knowledge pertaining to new developments.

- An innovation trap

Lots of the ideas you spot and share won't make sense, but maybe one or two will. The trap is your established, methodical process by which your organization, perhaps involving multiple "innovation leaders," takes the best potential ideas and turns them into concrete, actionable plans.

- An innovation runway

This is where you take workable ideas and turn them into something real. Proper design and implementation planning are key to making any new initiative work. Become experts at this part of the process and you'll see your innovative ideas turn into action.

- An innovation factory

Here is where new ideas are translated into real business processes and activities. Your factory involves experts at implementation, project management and the process of effecting change within the organization.

- An innovation rear-view mirror

With this, you are set up to constantly re-evaluate what you've learned, what you've implemented, and how well it has worked. Use this process to enhance your understanding of how to be innovative, by changing your approach for the next round of the innovation loop.

To support such an innovation loop, you need an organization that is receptive to risk-taking and rule-breaking. Mistakes shouldn't bear dire consequences, and people should be willing to learn from failure. This involves, for many organizations, a pretty sophisticated and significant cultural change, and so support is required from the top.

Make business-process innovation something that occurs on a regular and continuing basis. Don't make it something that only a few people are involved in — everyone throughout the organization must have some small role to play in the innovation loop.

And last but not least, don't make it special.

As an executive at Procter & Gamble said: "Don't make it special, don't celebrate it — make it ordinary." That way, your people will realize that innovation happens all the time and is something that everyone should be involved in.

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